

River Teifi, West Wales – Sea trout demise and stock overview

The Teifi is known as the Queen of Welsh Rivers. It flows through some of the most beautiful corners of our country and has always been revered for its population of brown trout and runs of both sea trout (sewin) and salmon. It is also rare in the fact that it has a population of grayling, albeit in low numbers.

Our salmon have finally been afforded the protection they needed and deserved, with full C&R coming into force from the 2020 season onwards. However, the most emblematic of all Welsh fish – the sewin – has yet again been forgotten about. Indeed, byelaw revisions that saw compulsory catch and release on salmon saw revisions that enabled further exploitation towards sewin in an era when they need protecting the most.

If you read nothing further, I implore you to read the following, easy to digest bullet points:

1. The River Teifi is categorised as an 'At Risk' river in terms of sea trout stocks by NRW; this essentially means that the stocks are fragile, at risk and need intervention to reduce the trend.
2. Since 2016, NRW have had a methodology in place to calculate a stock deficiency of adult / spawning sea trout within a given catchment. This is a figure that is below the break even of what the system needs in terms of returning adults – reaching this equilibrium does not then create an abundance, it then creates a balanced and sustainable level. In 2016 the Teifi had a Management Target deficit of 454, by 2017 it was 436, by 2018 it was 829 and by 2019 it reached 1,112.
3. Over the same period, catch returns on a rod and line perspective largely echoed this decline and deficit, which has been a long-term trend. In 2016 anglers caught 1,543 sea trout, 1,174 in 2017, 704 in 2018, and 2,035 in 2019. It is worth noting that over the same period that whilst anglers were catching less, they were releasing more. For example, 86% released in 2018. Also, the majority of fish being taken were OSW.
4. Even with such a massive decline and deficit, the net fishery continued unabated. The Teifi has more nets working within the freshwater environment than any other river in the UK – it has 12 coracle licences / nets available (24 coracles in total) to work the main river and then 3 seine net licences for the estuary section. In 2016 the nets in their entirety took 649 sea trout averaging 3 lbs 12 oz, 443 in 2017 averaging 3 lbs 15 oz, 514 in 2018 averaging 3 lbs 12 oz, and 307 in 2019 averaging 3 lbs 13 oz. Given the prolonged drought conditions through most of April, May and early June 2020 is likely to be a bumper year – certainly over 600 fish.
5. During their allotted season, the nets have zero quotas – they can literally catch and take every fish that runs the river. The fish are tagged, but there is no limit on the amount of tags per licence.

Recent quotes from NRW:

“Even relatively small numbers of fish are crucial to recover stocks in as short a time as possible. Every spawning fish matters.”

David Mee; Lead Specialist Advisor: Freshwater Fisheries Management.

“Nets can potentially capture large numbers of fish and given the current challenges facing stock numbers currently every sea trout or salmon taken represents another blow to our efforts to protect these iconic fish.”

David Lee; North and Mid-Wales operations team leader.

“Killing of fish should only occur where stocks of salmon and sea trout are sustainable.”

Peter Gough; Principal Advisor (Fisheries)

With the above in mind, one would envisage that NRW would have taken the golden opportunity to introduce and implement some long-needed byelaw revisions to protect such dwindling stocks and to also support their statements. However, to the contrary, the revisions saw a step back rather than forward. Namely:

1. There was a bag limit of 4 sea trout per day per angler on the Teifi. This was an incredibly high figure in this day and age. NRW took this out, to the extent that anglers can now take as many as they want on a daily basis. NRW's reasoning for this was that since they had not carried out any prosecutions in recent years for those in possession of excess bag limitations, the byelaw was no longer needed. This is, of course, in direct line with a massive reduction in the bailiff team; if there are very few bailiffs then catching anyone is highly unlikely. An analogy would be to have a 30mph speed limit, not police it then say; speeding is not an issue in an area so we're removing the limit in its entirety.
2. We were told that river specific regulations could not be introduced, even though local issues may exist, because it would be an all Wales approach. Yet during the same process changes were made on a Teifi specific basis (without consultation) which made exploitation on the river worse. There is a massive and well-known bottleneck at Cenarth Falls on the lower river. Historically this has been limited in terms of method, whereas from the 2020 season onwards any legal method can be utilised there, adding to exploitation in a location that has always had issues.
3. A max length of 60cm (around 6 lbs) was introduced for sea trout that can be taken across Wales. This is a big sea trout in anyone's book. Not only that, the measure is rather redundant and NRW know this. 60cm saves almost no sea trout, yet NRW know these is a spawning deficit to be tackled. In 2016 just 11 sea trout of over 6 lbs were caught, of which 4 were killed. In 2017 19 were caught, with just one killed. In 2018 11 were caught, with just one killed. In 2019 9 were caught, with just 2 killed. As such, NRW's new byelaw would have saved just 8 sea trout in four years. Bearing in mind the massive spawning deficit already known to them. If this max length was lowered to 50cm, then a significant amount more are saved. It is worth noting that Llandysul Angling Association introduced 50cm voluntarily around eight years ago and recently brought this down to 45cm in order to further protect stocks. The club now achieves a 92% catch and release statistic.
4. NRW took April and August away from the Teifi nets. August has close to zero impact on the sea trout run, as that is a month that they would have been catching and targeting salmon. April also have very little impact, as May and June have always been the 'killing' months. Also, if the river is low and due to the nature of the Teifi, chances are the fish would have remained in the Cilgerran area throughout April to be caught in May anyway, with the removal of April

achieving very little. For example, the nets caught a total of 22 sea trout in April of their 443 total in 2017. For reference, 6 were taken in August of that year.

5. NRW, in their wisdom, did not introduce the max kill length of 60cm to the nets. Whilst still being a high length limit, it would have saved a considerable amount more on the net front, given that the average size of the sea trout they catch on a seasonal basis is around 4 lbs.

All of this dovetails with my report, written in 2014 (Sea-Trout on the River Teifi, West-Wales; the demise of our emblematic fish - by Steffan Jones.). I have been banging the drum and highlighting the massive decline in our stocks since then, to no avail. During the byelaw consultation I passed on masses of information and technical supporting data, which was largely disregarded. We are at a pivotal point now where no intervention will lead to the loss of our iconic fish. Without these fish there is no heritage, there is no tradition and the future we present as custodians is one to be ashamed of.

Steffan Jones.